As April 15 came closer this year, I noticed several people around the county starting to get anxious. The dreaded tax deadline was upon us! For those avid gardeners among us, I observed a nervous kind of excitement. In the gardening world, April 15 is regarded as the last probable day for a killing frost, otherwise known as the ‘Frost Date.’

I have yet to see the IRS tote anyone off to the big house, nor have I had to pull my winter coat back out, so I think we are safe on both accounts. This can mean only one thing: it is time to plant our vegetable gardens.

Vegetable gardening can be a very rewarding experience. It can also be very frustrating if you are a first-timer or even if you have a bachelors in horticulture! As a transplanted Yankee educated in the south, I thought I knew what I was doing when I started my vegetable garden last year. I waited until May, had my husband build me a raised bed garden, and I even used store bought soil to fill the entire thing. Then I planted my English peas.

I can hear some of you groaning now. Yes, that’s me, - a Yankee trying to have English peas to harvest in the heat of the summer. I should have known better, but any problems I might have never crossed my mind.

Why is April 15 so important? And, what do English peas have to do with it, you ask? Mid-April is usually when our weather begins to stabilize. The days stay warmer along with the nights, making right now the best time to plant many of your typical plants: yellow squash, zucchini, eggplant, sweet corn, tomatoes, peppers, and watermelons.

Notice, I did not say English peas. Some vegetables, such as English peas, mustard greens, lettuce and others, need the cooler weather to keep the insects at bay and protect them from being burnt by the summer sun.

Because of the economy, many people have started small family gardens of their own. Over the past few weeks, I have received numerous calls from people wondering how to get started. A raised bed garden is an orderly and inexpensive way to get your garden going. With three 8-foot 2-by-10 boards, you can make a garden that is 4-feet wide and 8-feet long. These dimensions allow you to easily reach across the width of the garden, but provide room to grow enough vegetables to sustain a small family. A combination of topsoil, sand, peat, and compost should be used to ensure ample nutrients and drainage for the plants. When planting, consider the orientation of the garden. Place shorter plants on the east side and taller or
plants on the north or west end, then each plant receives enough light to sustain the most production.

You can weed by hand in a garden this size. With a few minutes every couple of days, you should not have any weed competition. Insects may be a struggle though. A well-maintained garden seems to draw insects like honey. Scout your garden often and keep track of insect populations. Chemical insecticides can be used, but soap and water will kill most any soft-bodied insect within minutes.

Gardening is a hands-on learning process. No one can impart everything you will need to know about gardening before you start. Something strange will always happen.

If you have a few burning questions, or just want to know more about vegetable gardening, join us for a home vegetable garden seminar from 6 to 8 p.m. May 10 in the O. P. Owens Auditorium. To make a reservation, call (910) 671-3276.

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact me, Kerrie Roach, horticultural Extension agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, at (910) 671-3276 or by e-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu or visit North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center’s website at Robeson.ces.ncsu.edu.

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